IMITATING NATURE

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Through my art I seek to communicate the continuing cycle of change that unites all life forms. I had to find methods of presentation and surface that would enhance my sculptural statements that I had begun to address. Utilizing salt, wood and low temperature sagger firing, resulted in softer, more natural appearing surfaces. These surfaces complimented and completed the organic forms with which I was working. The problems encountered in presentation were rectified by alternately contrasting the surfaces of the presentation with the surfaces of the pieces, while utilizing forms that echoed the natural forms of the pieces. The opposite approach also worked well, using natural presentation materials to create a sense of unity, and geometric bases for contrast. These methods resulted in an increased sense of energy, unity and completion in the work presented.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My initial training in the ceramic arts was in the functional tradition. I came to realize that there was much more I wished to bring to my art than craftsmanship and the functional aesthetic. Our lives are journeys of personal and spiritual growth, intertwined with all other life forms. I felt that we tend to lose sight of this vital concept and I have chosen to address this in my work. As a result, I have turned more and more to a sculptural expression in my chosen media. It has been a struggle to break from the methods that facilitate functional ware. These methods are not often suitable in a sculptural statement.

A change needed to be effected if my work was to continue to progress. Unity of form, surface and method of presentation were needed to achieve a cogency then missing. This lack of unity was due in part to my working process, which had been marked by an isolation of each stage from the next. This failure to plan ahead had resulted in a sense of disjointedness in the finished work.

In addressing the life journey in my work, I had come to focus on natural pod like forms. These evolved in several directions; forms that bespeak geology, plant forms, and forms that reminded me of marine animal physiology. I believe this very diversity speaks to the unity of existence. This endeavor was hindered by my lack of knowledge of surfaces, which suggests nature. The presentation of these forms had been static and without the energy that is part of natural forms and processes. These problems needed to be researched if satisfactory progress was to ensue. The forms were a joy, but justice was not being done with the other aspects of the pieces.

Statement of Problem

The focus of my work was the exploration of seed/pod like forms, suggesting growth and development; these references to nature in the forms had not been echoed or supported by the surfaces and textures applied to them. I proposed to develop various surface treatments, which included, but were not limited to, those that emulate nature. The presentation of pieces also lacked energy and didn't allow them to be viewed from more than one perspective. New methods of presentation were explored. The following questions were to be addressed:

1. How did the presentation enhance the statement?
2. How did the surface work together with the form?

Methodology

I proposed to create a body of twenty pieces of work that addressed my issues. A journal was kept during the project and this paper written on the results of these activities. An exhibition was mounted of the selected works.

I believe this more thoughtful, holistic approach to my work not only improved the quality of the work, but also increased the effectiveness of visual communication.

CHAPTER 2

RESEARCHING SURFACE

My first step towards resolving my problems was to create a variety of forms and then to make plaster casts from them. This was done to speed up production of work on which to explore surface finishes. It also enabled the subsequent alteration of the basic forms. The clay finally utilized was a cone ten stoneware with fine silica sand for strength. Although heavily textured clay had been tried, and was interesting, it seemed somewhat contrived in the final analysis. A more subtle texture was needed for a feeling of a unity between the elements of form and surface.

A long and mostly disappointing search for effective finishes proceeded at all temperatures. The color from acrylic paint was striking, but the gloss was all wrong. The color derived from oxides, from commercial sources and local stones, was natural enough, but whether ghosted with a satin-matte clear glaze or fired alone after being rubbed on bisqued forms the result fell short. There was still a sense of a separation between form and skin. Color, on the whole, didn't seem to be a problem, except with the wax shoe polish, which produced some pretty jarring effects. The efforts with encaustic failed, not due to a deficiency in the material, but to a deficiency in my own skills and from never having utilized this form of wax surface before; it has been used by other artists to produce glowing, translucent finishes on ceramic pieces. My efforts with encaustic are only temporarily abandoned. However, vitreous engobes, which gave good color, also resulted in very hard, dead-appearing surfaces were more suitable to functional ware.

Glazes were varied in their effectiveness. Several gave great textures, although there was still a sense of application rather than a natural outgrowth. The colors would

have needed some serious manipulation to be successful. The only really successful glazes turned out to be those indirectly applied, resulting from wood and salt firings. Somehow, the natural processes involved spoke clearly of an organic growth in the resultant textures and coloration, rather than of artificial application.

When it was suggested substituting a low-fire sagger process instead of the pit-fire that had been under consideration, it sounded like a viable alternative. There had been intriguing results published in the past using this method. The results of my first experiments were immediately encouraging. Some really bright colors were attained on bisqued clay, using saggers fabricated from slip-dipped newspaper over paper bags, combined with red oak and fig leaves at cone .06. The texture of the pieces was very rough. Terra sigillata was combined with various chemicals, combustibles and additives for color, then employed for its characteristic sheen and soft quality to remedy that defect. The resulting surfaces brought to mind the surfaces of some seeds, leaves, and seashells, referencing the organic forms.

Saggers of clay boxes topped with kaowool and shelves were tried, as well as saggers fabricated from soft brick in an attempt to ascertain any variation in the final surfaces.

At cone .06 some interesting textures were achieved. This was the result of the sagger's tendency at this temperature to fuse, in spots, with the pieces being fired, as well as the fusing of the steel wool to the pieces. There was an effect that brought to mind objects dredged up from the sea-bottom after ages of immersion. This was very satisfying in a visceral sort of way. This still wasn't the desired result, although it worked. Consultation resulted in experimentation with lower temperatures of cone .010-.012.

The terra sigillatas used were red and white. The white was then colored with commercial stains and oxides, adding sulfates of copper, cobalt, and iron at times. The results were quite sufficient, with a little adjustment of ratios. I don't believe that any one of them was superior in results over the others, and a satisfactory range of color was achieved.

The surface of the terra sigillata was further altered by the use of combustible materials, various salts, wood ash, and seaweed extracts. The combustibles consisted of produce, seeds, nutshells, seashells, seaweed and tree leaves. Of all the varieties tried, only the most successful will be addressed. Seaweed imparted a remarkable range of colors and strong visual textures to the surfaces, partly due to its salt content and form. When my supply of seaweed was exhausted, a natural fertilizer of seaweed extract was substituted. This resulted in a burst of color, but not texture. Small-leaf spinach had vastly superior results over the large-leafed variety. The visual and actual textures in grays and whites were phenomenal over a colored terra sigillata background, yielding a lichenous effect suggesting growth processes that was most satisfying. Carrot greens gave a nice textural effect and slices of red carrots resulted in some nice color splotches. The most successful of the seeds utilized were from the pod of some desert willow. They gave a lovely yellow spot at point of contact.

Fig leaves and red oak leaves gave the strongest and most varied color and textures of the tree leaves. Fig leaves, in particular, gave a range of color from bright yellows and purples to reds. Sweet gum and maple leaves were more subtle, but still quite effective, for both color and visual textures. The random steaks from the stems and splotches from the leaves gave an impression of freedom from any kind of manufacture other than natural processes. Peach leaves imparted a lovely pale peach

color in the shape of the leaves themselves that worked well with the white terra sigillata. The patterns and colors, all of natural derivation, resonated with the organic nature of the forms, achieving unity of surface and form.

Other color and texture came from interesting items. Seashells added a little color, but were more effective in the textures left behind. Steel wool, as mentioned before, could, at higher temperatures, fuse to the surfaces in interesting dark brown to black marks. At lower temperatures, it gave an orange to brown network over the surfaces that spoke of rotting vegetation and natural processes. Lavender and sage green commercial stains gave consistent results, as did the cobalt sulfate, cobalt carbonate, and iron sulfate. The copper sulfate, depending on the amount utilized, gave soft pinks to maroon in reduction. When the container wasn't airtight, of course, green was the result. On occasion, Epsom salts yielded a subtle lavender color. Coarse sea salt yielded a bright orange, highly textured surface, again suggesting an object that had been immersed in seawater for a substantial time. This echoed the marine creature-like forms of the pods, enhancing the total statement. When ground finely, the sea salt gave much more subtle color and texture, but still much stronger than the table salt, pickling or rock salts. The latter substances, as well as monosodium glutamate and wood ash, functioned as fluxes to intensify the combustibles effects. I suspect that the sea salt and seaweed were more efficacious due to a higher mineral content.

CHAPTER 3

PRESENTATION

The presentation of the pieces was the most difficult barrier to a successful incorporation of all aspects of the work. I had tried to use dried vines in conjunction with my work, but the natural surface of the wood and the naturalistic surfaces of the vines clashed. Other wood pieces with stronger surfaces and patterns overpowered the clay surfaces. Creating a background that could highlight the non-clay element, which allowed the clay surfaces to be displayed, solved these problems. Against a flat black paint, the sheen and colors and textures were seen in stark contrast to the wood, while still echoing the natural shapes of the wood with their own forms. The flat black surface also worked to advantage on geometric bases combined with curvilinear shaped metal holding the pieces up. The metal was patinaed for a quiet contrast to the clay surface. Metal also supported clay pieces on various stone bases. The stone surfaces echoed the color and visual textures of the clay without diminishing their effect.

The matte white surface of limestone had a similar effect to the flat black painted surfaces. The angularity of these bases emphasized the organic clay forms, and setting the forms into carved depressions in the limestone helped to integrate the forms with the bases. The base for number seven was carved into to provide a visual integrity when joined with the clay form.

Pieces number five and 17 utilized clay forms as the bases for the sculptures. This worked particularly well, because the sculptures seemed to be growing out of the bases and enhanced the statement about growth.

A variety of containers were utilized to display the pods, ranging from an acrylic box,

shaker boxes, a carved box, baskets, trays, a footed metal bowl and a cast bird nest. The bird's nest was white and worked well in displaying a cracked, egg-shaped pod. I have found that eggs and egg cases come in a remarkable variety of shapes. This presentation seemed to have logic to it, as did the pods reminiscent of sea creatures displayed in the black sand that filled the bottom of the acrylic cube. The basket, trays and the bowl full of pods were successful because the presentation brought to mind harvested produce, a direct reference to nature's infinite species and their interrelation and interdependence. The pod with the delicate tentacles felt right on velvet, within the protection of the carved box.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

Now I would like to analyze several of the most successful pieces. Pieces twelve and sixteen, with their forms similar to marine animals and their mottled camouflaged surfaces spoke of life processes, the forms reinforced by the surfaces. Supported in grass-like metal forms, shaped to simulate water currents, the sense of aquatic suspension was carried even further. A unity among the various aspects was achieved.

Piece number 18, with its natural base of twisted vine and spray of pods bursting out at the viewer, created a sense of movement and unleashed energy. The elongated pod shapes added to the sense of movement, and the spray premise was obviously inspired by common growth habits. This piece is possibly the most successful in fulfilling its intended purpose.

Piece number one also worked well, achieving an upward sense of movement through the spiraling and forking of the vine base. The positions of the pods lent an outward motion to the piece, while their tentacles echoed the forking of the wood, to integrate the clay and base.

Piece number eight, nestled in one block of limestone spoke of a continuing growth process with their similar, but varying shapes and stages of sprouting. Joined on one base, yet still separate, they nevertheless became a single unit.

The swelling clay base of piece number seventeen gave rise to the energy of the literati- style branch, which accentuated growth and change in the clay chrysalis. The variety of shapes involved added further visual interest.

Piece number 15, on a block of wood, worked in part because the grain of the wood led the eye to the pod it supported. The wood-fired clay had a very strong visual

surface, and held its own with the wood's surface. The receding areas of the base brought to mind decay, while the developing seed forms on the pod spoke of the growth phase of nature's cycles.

The large pod, number two, rested on a base that focused towards the clay piece. The pod received energy from being held on its side rather than lying flat. The tusk shells that supported the pod gave more energy with their line, while echoing the curved surface of the clay piece and the slant of the base shape.

Summary

I feel that the difficulties previously encountered with my work have been successfully resolved, and I now understand how to present a piece in a way that enhances the concept. The disparity between surface and form was successfully addressed. I believe that this project has altered my approach to working in a positive way, with the result of the end product giving a sense of completion and resolution, as well as unity.